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UNCLAS YEREVAN 001938

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: LOCAL RESULTS NULLIFIED IN ELECTORAL DEJA VU

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SUMMARY

11. (SBU) Territorial Election Commission (TEC) officials declared the results from an August 29 parliamentary by-election invalid August 31 following widespread reports of violations and an unreliable thin margin of only 32 votes between the two candidates. Analysts viewed the election as an important mid-term gauge of local political power for two rival, pro-government camps (National Assembly Speaker Arthur Baghdasaryan and Procurator General Aghvan Hovsepyan each strongly endorsed a candidate in the race). Election observers cited numerous cases of ballot stuffing and irregularities in the final vote counts. End Summary.

REPORTS OF BALLOT STUFFING, BRIBERY IN PRECINT 44

12. (U) TEC officials in a precinct just north of Yerevan announced August 31 that they had invalidated the results of a parliamentary by-election held the previous weekend. With an unusually high voter turnout of 67 percent (approximately 28,000 voters), local businessmen Artak Sargsyan led challenger Araik Hairapetyan by only 32 votes. The TEC said that the election would have to be re-run because the commission registered too many discrepancies, including 21 complaints from the two candidates' representatives. A small team of Yerevan-based international observers (including representatives from "It's Your Choice") reported witnessing violations including an incident in which 200 ballots marked for Sargsyan were prevented from being stuffed into the ballot box at one of the polling stations. Media coverage included eyewitness accounts of payment for votes and local law enforcement and procurators unduly meddling into the final count process in favor of Hairapetyan. According to press reports, Baghdasaryan and Hovsepyan will separately meet with Kocharian to discuss the by-election outcome. The TEC has not yet set a date for the re-run.

ZERO-SUM POWER GAME

13. (SBU) Both candidates are pro-establishment wealthy businessmen representing powerful pro-Kocharian forces. Artak Sargsyan represents Baghdasaryan's Orinats Yerkir (OY) party, while Araik Hairapetyan is backed by procurator general Hovsepyan. Most analysts viewed the race as a gauge of Baghdasaryan's and Hovsepyan's relative political clout. The two other ruling coalition parties, the Republican Party and ARF Dashnaktsutyun, refrained from endorsing or campaigning for the OY candidate, indicating what some observers predict may be a cooling-off within the coalition.

COMMENT

14. (SBU) Rumors of Baghdasaryan and Hovsepyan's ambitions for the next presidential election framed this local race as the first tangible political trial balloon for potential Kocharian successors. What the failed vote appears to more clearly indicate, however, is that serious electoral problems remain in Armenia. The only silver lining that we might find here is that this is the first election result in recent memory to be so quickly annulled for improper democratic procedure.

EVANS